

All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1997 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions." *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (1997), 380-381.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10106>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

of northern Indians; the same map depicts the contraction of buffalo in Iowa to the state's northwest region. Subsequent exhibits that include Iowa locate utopian communities during the antebellum era, the frontier in 1850, the westward penetration of railroads in 1860 and 1890, Iowa's rank in literacy (very high) and school expenditures (middling) in 1910, and the distribution of "dry" (anti-liquor) counties in 1915. For the Great Depression years, one can compare Iowa with its sister states on the severity of the droughts of 1934 and 1936, the distribution of airports constructed or improved by the WPA, the vote of the state's congressional delegation on isolation in 1938, and the homicide rate (Iowa was very low). This reverence for life helps to explain Iowa's distaste for capital punishment, the subject of two maps. Arraying information by states allows the reader to place Iowa in context among its sister commonwealths and to gain an appreciation of the regional differences that mark the United States. This informative book would serve well as a supplement to broad courses on American history and as a gift to individuals of any age.

All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions, by Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. vii, 136 pp. Notes, index. \$35.00 cloth, \$13.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY C. ELIZABETH RAYMOND, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

What are we to make of a book on American regions that omits the Middle West? Iowans will find no discussion of themselves or their neighboring states in this compilation of four essays. The first three authors focus on regional identity in the South, the West, and New England, respectively, while Peter Onuf explores the political origins of regionalism. Nonetheless, the collection has its rewards for neglected midwesterners.

The central premise of the essays in *All Over the Map* (which, despite its title, features not a single map) is that regions are a persistent and significant feature of American identity. The authors are interested in exploring why this is so, why, as Ayers and Onuf state in the introduction, "some cultural distinctions come to matter, while so many do not, in the construction of collective identities" (8). Rejecting geographic determinism, which suggests that regions are inherent and unchanging divisions that derive from physical landscape, they submit instead that regions are contextual, that they developed in response to American nationalism.

Onuf's opening essay explains the second claim in greater detail, as he argues that sectionalism was embedded in the federalist debate of the late eighteenth century: "Nationalism in America developed in tandem with opposition to centralized state power; sectionalism was its logical corollary" (13). Federalists and Anti-Federalists both trumpeted the dangers of section. Over time, however, hardening divisions between North and South undermined the union that had once been guaranteed by the existence of competing sectional interests.

The remaining essays turn from political to cultural definitions of American regions. Stephen Nissenbaum demonstrates that New England regionalism emerged during the 1820s with industrialization. Only after the Civil War did New England's regional image become firmly identified with the quaint, eighteenth-century town common, thanks in large part to regional writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Nissenbaum observes that this process of "pastoralization" continues, by means of calendars and tourism (59-60).

Edward Ayers explores the origins of assumptions about southern "difference" from the rest of the United States: "We draw boundaries between things we call cultures and then fill in those boundaries with something to make the boundaries meaningful" (66). Ayers finds Americans engaged, at least since the 1830s, in labeling as distinctively southern traits that were actually widespread. Permeable boundaries and contested meaning rather than an essential distinctiveness, he argues, characterize southern society (81).

Patricia Limerick tackles a somewhat different task, attempting to substantiate the existence of a coherent region in the territory west of the 100th Meridian despite its geographical, economic, and cultural heterogeneity. To that end she lists ten characteristics that justify treating the West as a region, and argues for the importance of regional history: "Without the regional level of meaning, the more general levels are unrooted, ungrounded, abstract, and unconvincing" (93). Hers is, incidentally, the only essay even to mention the Midwest.

All Over the Map makes the important point that regional identity is not inherent in physical region. Instead, regionalism is a cultural product. It has distinctive characteristics in various places, and it changes over time. Despite the failure of this volume to do so, these insights can profitably be applied to the Midwest as well.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.